

THE UNIVERSAL PROVIDER

By Mike J. Burrows.

William Whitely, the son of a corn factor of the same name, was born at Agbrigg, near Wakefield, on 29th September 1831. By June 1848 he had given up working with his brothers on his uncle's farm and became apprenticed as a draper's assistant to Messrs. Harnew & Glover of Wakefield. After paying a visit to the Great Exhibition he came to the conclusion that London was to be his oyster. To this end he became employed by the Fore Street Warehouse Company in 1852.

After about ten years he had managed to get enough capital together to open his own shop in the so-called 'Bancruptcy Row' Westbourne Grove. By the time Sloper and his rivals were pursuing their trade he must have looked a very promising proposition as by 1876 he had 15 shops, an expanding orders by post business, and employed 2,000 people.

As with several other successful entrepreneurs he had his bad times. Worst of all, he did seem to be plagued by fire. On 17th November 1882, 13 shops, numbers 43 to 55 Westbourne Grove were burnt down. The new premises were damaged by fire on 26th April 1884. A year later 4 large shops were ruined. In August 1887 damage to the tune of £500,000 was inflicted, but more serious was the loss of three innocent lives. A reward of £3,000 was offered for the discovery of the suspected malevolent.

Like the well-known phoenix, William rose yet again from the ashes. His business accumen and the adoption of the two hemispheres with the Universal Provider insignia, gave rise to several stories of the ability of his company to obtain anything from a white elephant to a second-hand coffin. One can only presume this to be a misfit.

With a turnover of over £1,000,000 it was decided to convert the business into a limited company which came into effect on 2nd June 1899. William continued to work in his business and it was whilst in one of his shops that tragedy struck on 24th January 1907. A young man, Horace George Rayner, entered the premises and claimed to be his illegitimate son. Considering him to be a blackmailer, William was about to summon the police when Rayner shot him dead. Rayner received the death penalty on 22nd March but this was later commuted to life imprisonment.

The business of William Whitely Limited was continued by his sons and in October 1911, an imposing building was opened in Queen's Road.

Six different perfins are recorded at present:-

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|-------|----------|-------------|------|
| 792.2 | W.W. | 16,16 | 5mm |
| 811.2 | WW/LD | 13,13/7,9 | 5mm |
| 812.1 | WW/LTD | 11,11/6,5,6 | 4½mm |
| | WW/LTD.. | 16,16/7,5,7 | 5½mm |
| 827.1 | W.W/U.P | 16,16/8,8 | 4/3½ |
| 827.2 | W.W/U.P | 16,16/10,10 | 5½mm |